

# How to Reduce Costs by Attacking Course Proliferation

## *A Look at Some College Administrative Concerns*

BY LEWIS J. LARSON

**T**he delegation insisted that there was no way for the Columbia Union Conference to operate, finance, or staff a four-year college. They also seemed convinced that there weren't enough students to justify its existence. Consequently, accreditation would be out of the question.

However, there was a way, and the union did continue to operate the institution. It not only financed the college, but it also invested in advanced training for its faculty. It maintained a quality staff, drastically reduced course offerings, and increased enrollment substantially.

Within two years of starting the study discussed in this article, the college was fully accredited.

They said there was "No way!" But there was a way!

### **The Problem**

Most Adventist colleges and universities are faced with rapidly rising operating costs, which are usually passed on to students. This inevitably results in limiting enrollment from the less-economically favored levels of the constituency, or forces them to incur long-term indebtedness

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through a student-loan program. Many families are unwilling to saddle their children or themselves with such a heavy debt in order to finance a college education. But education is considered essential in modern society, so young people are, accordingly, sent to publicly supported institutions. As a result, our college enrollments decline, and student costs continue to rise.

Because of enrollment growth and socio-economic changes that have occurred during the past two decades, new departments, majors, minors, courses, and buildings have been added on most SDA

campuses, sometimes without much concern about the financial impact of such innovations. In many cases, these changes, particularly in the instructional area, have had minimal if any board involvement.

Many institutions now find themselves deeply in debt, some so seriously so that accrediting associations have become concerned. In certain cases, it seems the situation has reached such proportions that the administration apparently does not know how or where to begin to correct the problem.

Unfortunately, the bottom line is money. Contributing causes to escalating costs may be (1) new construction without adequate planning for utilities, maintenance, and repayment of loans for construction; (2) administrative costs; (3) student services, including food, housing, and transportation; (4) instructional services; (5) campus and plant services; (6) board structure and involvement; and in some cases (7) affiliation relationships.

Each of these is a vital area of concern that requires constant administrative attention if an institution is to maintain a sound financial condition. The institution's operating statement will indicate the

many areas of expense involved in the routine operation of the institution. Each needs detailed study and possible adjustment.

### **Choosing Administrators**

Intimately related but seldom considered, in terms of the efficient operation of a college or university, is the method of choosing administrative personnel. Many institutions seem to expend little real concern in the selection of candidates for these offices. The trustees expect persons employed as teachers to be technically trained in their disciplines. This usually means that they have completed formal training in the content areas of a specific instructional field.

But trustees are often either unaware of—or seem unconcerned about—the needed qualifications and technical training for administrative personnel (especially the academic administrator) to ensure the successful performance of their responsibilities. Do the trustees realize that major universities offer training specifically for academic affairs personnel as well as for other higher education administrators?

The area of administration in an institution deals directly and intimately with human beings—students, teachers, administrators, and trustees—so great care must be taken in initiating, structuring, conducting, and interpreting the research involved.

Too often administrative appointments are made on the basis of long-term or outstanding experience as a teacher plus

popularity, or some type of relationship, such as family or political, or even as a result of hierarchical pressure. Unfortunately, it even happens that a faculty will recommend someone for an administrative position by writing names on the blackboard and voting by a show of hands, without regard for the actual requirements of the job or the qualifications of the chosen candidate. On the basis of such an action, the president presents the name to the trustees and the nominee is confirmed.

A preferred method of obtaining an academic administrator would be for the trustees to establish a search committee that gives adequate notice of the vacancy, solicits applications from interested per-

sons, and receives recommendations of qualified individuals from additional sources. After a reasonable time, the search committee selects from the pool of names the small group of individuals who are considered most suitable. These persons are then subjected to additional research and study.

A candidate's personality, his or her technical and professional training, background in, knowledge of, and commitment to Seventh-day Adventist education and beliefs, along with his or her personal and family's goals need to be known and fully considered rather than assumed.

After further investigation and elimination, the small group of finalists thus

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chosen should be interviewed by both board and faculty groups, and a final selection made jointly. Such a process should eliminate appointments on the basis of popularity, nepotism, or hierarchical pressure and provide the institution with individuals who are well-qualified for the job and an asset to the institution.

### **Reducing Instructional Costs**

When the institution decides that the time has come to reduce instructional costs, the first step should be for the trustees to formally authorize the administration to conduct an in-depth analysis of the entire academic program of the institution, and to take such steps as deemed advisable to correct problems revealed by the study. This will take some time and may require funding. If the study is to succeed and convince those who participate that they are not merely engaged in an exercise in futility or a “witchhunt,” explicit goals and desired outcomes should be determined and preserved in written form.

Outlined below are the procedures followed by the author in conducting such a study of instructional planning in one institution, a brief report on the research, the administrative work that resulted from it, and some suggestions to help prevent course proliferation.

If the trustees vote to require or authorize the study, this will lend authority to the researchers and credence to the finished product. This action could also be approved by the executive board or the administrative council.

Unfortunately, during the course of the study, an individual, a committee, or an office may for some reason be uncooperative. At such times, the value of the authorizing action becomes quite evident.

Of necessity, the following procedures are sequentially listed, but in most cases the actions will need to occur simultaneously:

- Assign the task of assessment to the academic council or, preferably, to a small, specifically created study group with a self-elected chairperson, but under the general supervision of the vice-president for academic affairs or the academic dean. In some cases—such as when such an assignment

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would overload him or her—it may be wise to employ someone who is not connected with the institution to direct the study.

- First, examine the current bulletin to obtain the course listings for all departments. (A computer and a well-designed spreadsheet program can be a big help!) Show whether each course is required for a major, a minor, or to meet a core curriculum requirement. For each course, show hours of credit, frequency of meeting, the number of students currently enrolled, and each time it was offered in the past two years, along with the name of the instructor(s) teaching the course.

- List all degrees offered and the required courses for each, with hours of credit and the department offering the course.

- From the records office, obtain a list of degrees granted during each of the past two years and those currently being offered, the number of graduates receiving each degree each year, and the number of seniors currently enrolled in each.

- Also, have the records office provide lists of all courses actually being taught currently and in each of the past two years, with the number of students enrolled in each course each time it was offered and the name of the instructor. Make a separate list of the courses offered by each department but not actually taught.

- Compare the number of departmental courses required for graduation in the majors, minors, and core curriculum.

- Prepare an analysis of each degree offered, showing the number of hours required, the number and name of all courses required, elective hours allowed, and courses recommended as electives, as well as courses required but offered by another department.

- Have each department offering a degree that produces very few graduates prepare a brief defense of the degree and a statement of the possible impact on the department and institution if the degree were eliminated.

- Prepare a list showing courses offered but not required for any degree offered by the department or as a core curriculum requirement.

- Identify core curriculum courses.

- If the institution is affiliated with other institutions, domestic or foreign, either for certification of degrees or provision of instructional support, list each institution and show the extent of involvement—personnel, time, office space, travel, finance, etc.

The institution's academic affairs committee should assess each department and its course offerings in light of the facts revealed by the above study. To make themselves economically viable, departments should stop offering all courses and degrees that do not attract a sufficient number of students.

Our study found that the majors and minors in departments with reduced course offerings could be recombined to create additional degree programs without increasing personnel or damaging class enrollment size.

Funds saved by not hiring additional faculty or adding new courses unless they were academically necessary and financially feasible freed up a sizeable sum for

improving faculty qualifications while keeping student fees at a minimum.

Even though the study did produce some grumbling, especially when it revealed the need to prune some deadwood, or to eliminate some pet courses, the overall academic, financial, and personnel changes proved rewarding.

### **Results of One Restructuring**

The study referred to above, which was conducted under the direction of the author, enabled the administrators to restructure all majors and minors and to reduce the total course offerings by 97 (not hours—courses!). This was a net figure after allowing for 11 courses added in three young but rapidly growing departments.

The administrative actions taken also made it possible to double the enrollment of the institution without increasing the teaching staff or overloading any instructional personnel.

### **Suggestions**

To maintain the gains made by the study, there needs to be a rigid control sys-

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tem to regulate the introduction of new departments, courses, or affiliations.

Keep in mind that the ultimate responsibility rests with the board of trustees to employ properly qualified personnel to fill administrative offices.

Finally, some related areas that merit consideration:

- What about deadwood on the faculty?
- What about nepotism?
- Beware of competition between institutions. (Bigger isn't always better!)
- Another danger—introducing a course or a program to prevent a sister institution from offering it. Remember the Golden Rule!

In addition to the course proliferation study, the trustees should analyze the work load of each administrator. Is every one really needed? Do they have overlapping responsibilities? Is all their travel justified? Is the school top heavy, administratively speaking?

The administration should analyze the classroom load of each teacher as well as the assigned co-curricular and extra-curricular loads of all teachers. Taking a second job or doing work outside the school should also come under scrutiny.

Finally, before getting too enthusiastic over a proposal to enlarge the physical plant, the administration should do a study of the actual use of existing facilities. Accepting a gift may involve the institution in years of unplanned-for expense.

If boards and administrators follow the advice offered above, they should be able to cut costs and reduce course proliferation, while maintaining a quality academic program. ☞

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